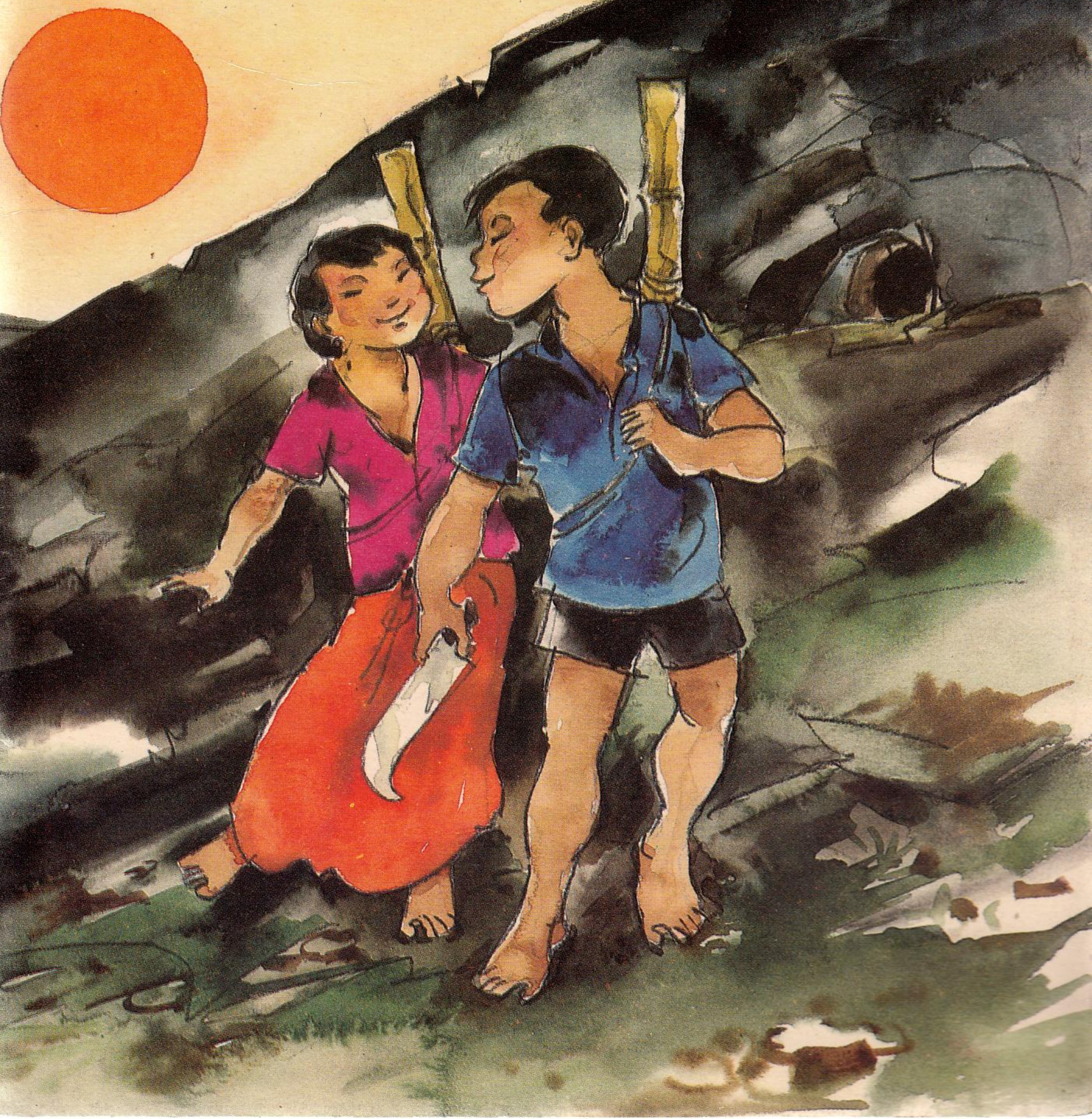




THE CRYSTAL CAVE

Arup Kumar Dutta



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Dedicated to Priyanuj



THE CRYSTAL CAVE

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National Book Trust, India



GRANDMA KAMLONG

"Here... taste this," Grandma Kamlong said.

She scooped out a ladleful of broth from the pan which bubbled over the fireplace. It smelt delicious. Thenyak and Changun waited expectantly, their mouths beginning to water. Grandma Kamlong blew on the bamboo ladle to cool the broth. Then she poured a little into two avid open mouths.

"Yuk!" exclaimed Thenyak. "It tastes awful!" Changun said nothing. But her screwed up features told all!

"Don't like it, do you?" said Grandma Kamlong with a toothless grin. "But watch now."

Using the ladle, she scooped up a little salt from a wooden bowl and put it into the broth. She sang a *Nocte* ballad as she stirred, smiling mysteriously all the while.

This was what made Grandma Kamlong such great fun! She could put life and mystery into the most trivial chore!

She was the oldest person in the village—even older than their *Lowang*, or *Nocte* tribal chief. Her slate-black skin was creased and



wrinkled like a wilted leaf in autumn. Her hair was white as quicklime. Her eyes were small and bright and beady as a bird's.

No one in the village could tell how old she was. She must have been in her early eighties, though in the adoring eyes of the village youngsters she appeared to be a thousand years old!

She was a treasure-house of stories. It was from her that the village children learnt about the history of their tribe—about *Khunbao*, the great ancestor of the *Nocte* race and his sons, *Khunlai* and *Khunlang*; about the supreme deity called *Jauban* or *Tesong* and the teachings of the great *Nocte* saint *Narottam*; about those distant days when the *Noctes* were great warriors and went on regular head-hunting expeditions. The skulls taken as trophies still hung in the village *Morung*.



She lived alone in her little hut. Spry and active despite her age, she had refused to heed the pleas of her sons and daughters that she live with them. Her favourite grandchildren, Thenyak and Changun, spent more time with her than with their own parents.

Having finished stirring, Grandma Kamlong made the children taste the broth once more.

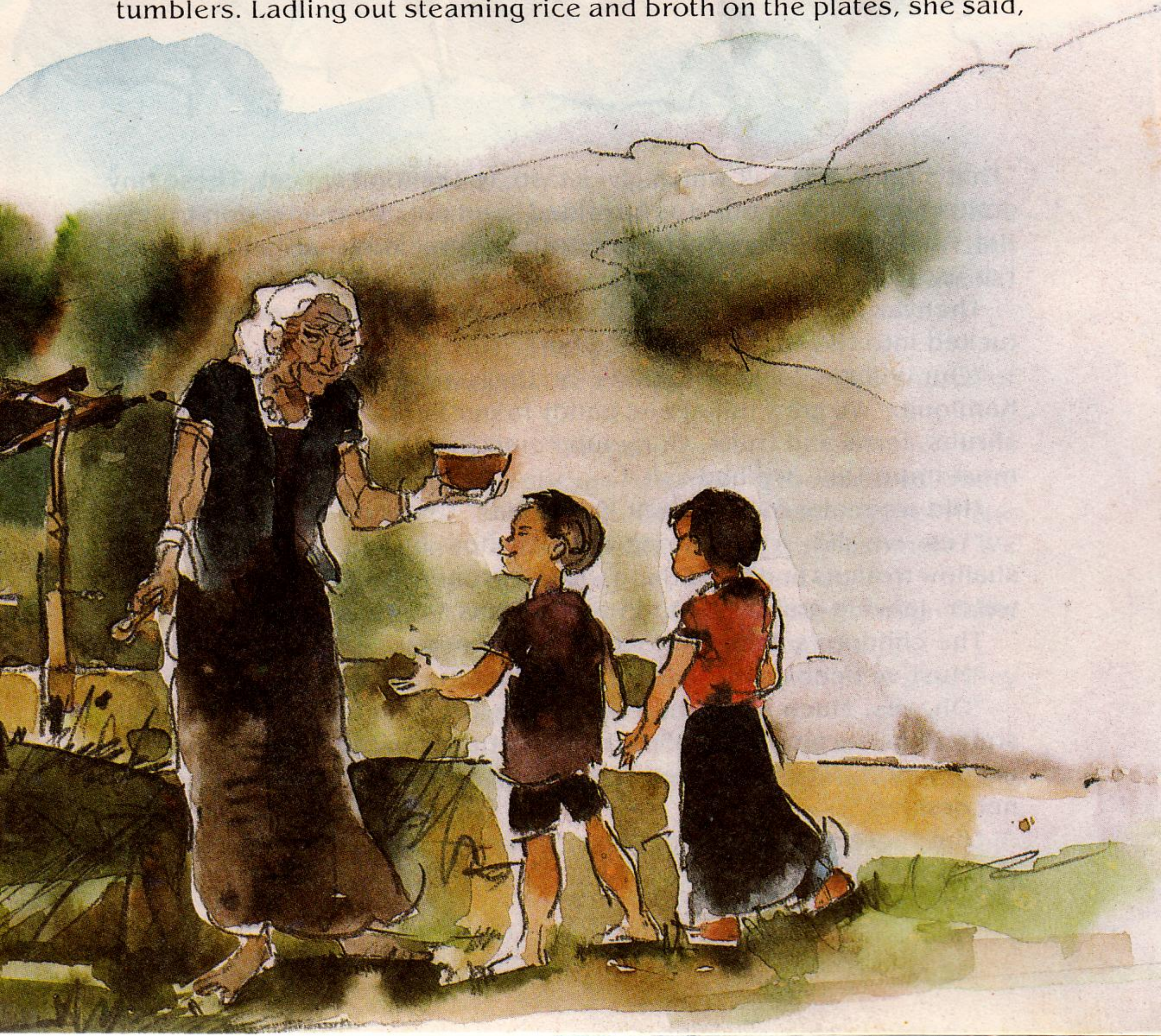
"Ah!" said Thenyak, smacking his lips in approval. "This is more like it! Delicious, grandma."

Changun said nothing. But the smile of delight on her face told all!

"Magic, isn't it?" Grandma Kamlong said. "The broth was tasteless before. But now it is delicious. What caused this miracle?"

"Salt!" the children yelled out in a laughing chorus.

The old woman wiped the wooden floor with a wet rag. She placed three reed-mats upon it, as well as dishes of wood and bamboo tumblers. Ladling out steaming rice and broth on the plates, she said,





"That's right. It is salt which gives taste to the food we eat. These tiny grains appear as humble as speckled sand on a river-isle, don't they? But, for a tribe like the *Nocte*, they're more precious than gold or silver. For us, to possess salt is to possess wealth."

Thenyak and Changun nodded as they squatted on the floor and tucked into the food.

"Our village lacked nothing in the past," continued Grandma Kamlong. "We grew millet and paddy in our fields. The jungles gave us shrubs, ferns and fruits. Our young men went hunting for meat. And, most important, we had salt."

"Did we make our own salt, grandma?" Changun asked surprised.

"Yes, we did. A salt-spring used to flow by our village. We built shallow troughs and filled them with salt-water. The sun dried away the water, leaving grains of salt in the troughs."

The children's eyes grew round with wonder.

"Must've been an awful lot of salt, grandma," Thenyak commented.

"Oh, yes. Much more than what our village required. Our menfolk stuffed the surplus into hollow bamboo tubes and took it to the plains each winter. They bartered the salt for clothes, beads and other necessities."

"But there's no salt-spring now," Changun said. "No longer do our elders make salt."



Grandma Kamlong sighed with regret.

"True," she said. "Our village is poorer for that. We've lost a precious heritage. No longer are we self-sufficient. Far from having our wealth in salt, our young men have to trudge all the way to Khonsa township to buy it from traders."

"Did the salt-spring dry up?" Thenyak asked.

"Yes. It happened one winter... years and years ago. Our source of wealth dried up with it."

"Why did it dry up?" persisted Thenyak.

"No one knows. The villagers discussed it among themselves. Some thought it to be the work of an evil spirit. Others opined that the village in some way had offended *Jauban* and this was His punishment. We prayed and made offerings. But the spring remained dry."

"There could have been other reasons," Changun said thoughtfully. "Someone should have climbed the mountain to find out."

"Oh, our villagers were too fearful to do so. You see, dear girl, they were afraid that *Jauban* might be displeased."

A dreamy, far-away look appeared on Thenyak's face.

"Tell me, grandma," he said, "if the spring flows again, will it bring prosperity to our village?"

"Yes," said Grandma Kamlong. "Our village would then be self-sufficient and prosperous again."

THENYAK'S DECISION

The *Nocte* tribe, to which Thenyak and Changun belonged, is one of the many tribes inhabiting the beautiful state of Arunachal. The *Noctes* live in the riverine, mountainous district of Tirap.

Nocte villages were always set on the top of steep hills. This was to protect them against enemies in bygone days when there had been warfare between different tribes. The village in which Thenyak and Changun lived nestled atop a steep hill, with higher mountain ranges in the background. Many paths snaked away from the village. Some led to neighbouring villages, others to the millet and paddy fields on the surrounding hillsides.

One such bridle-path wound down towards the tiny valley below. A small river, flowing through the valley, was the source of water for the village. Each morn and eve village women walked down to the river carrying long bamboo tubes which they filled with water. Then they climbed the path once more back to the village.

Later in the afternoon, having bid Grandma Kamlong goodbye, Thenyak and Changun trotted down this path. They wanted to see the spot where the salt-spring had flowed into the river.

Though grandma had described the location, Changun doubted whether they would be able to find the mouth of the spring.



"It was years and years ago," she said. "Must be overgrown with shrubs and trees by now."

"Well, no harm trying," said Thenyak. "We've nothing else to do, anyway."

But, to their joyous surprise, they had no difficulty at all. The furrow through which the salt-spring had flowed was clearly visible. Only ferns and creepers covered the furrow. They could see it wind up the mountain, a ribbon of light-green against the darker green of dense jungles.

"What a stroke of luck!" he cried. "We can follow it upstream now."

"Are you thinking of climbing up this mountain?" Changun cried out.

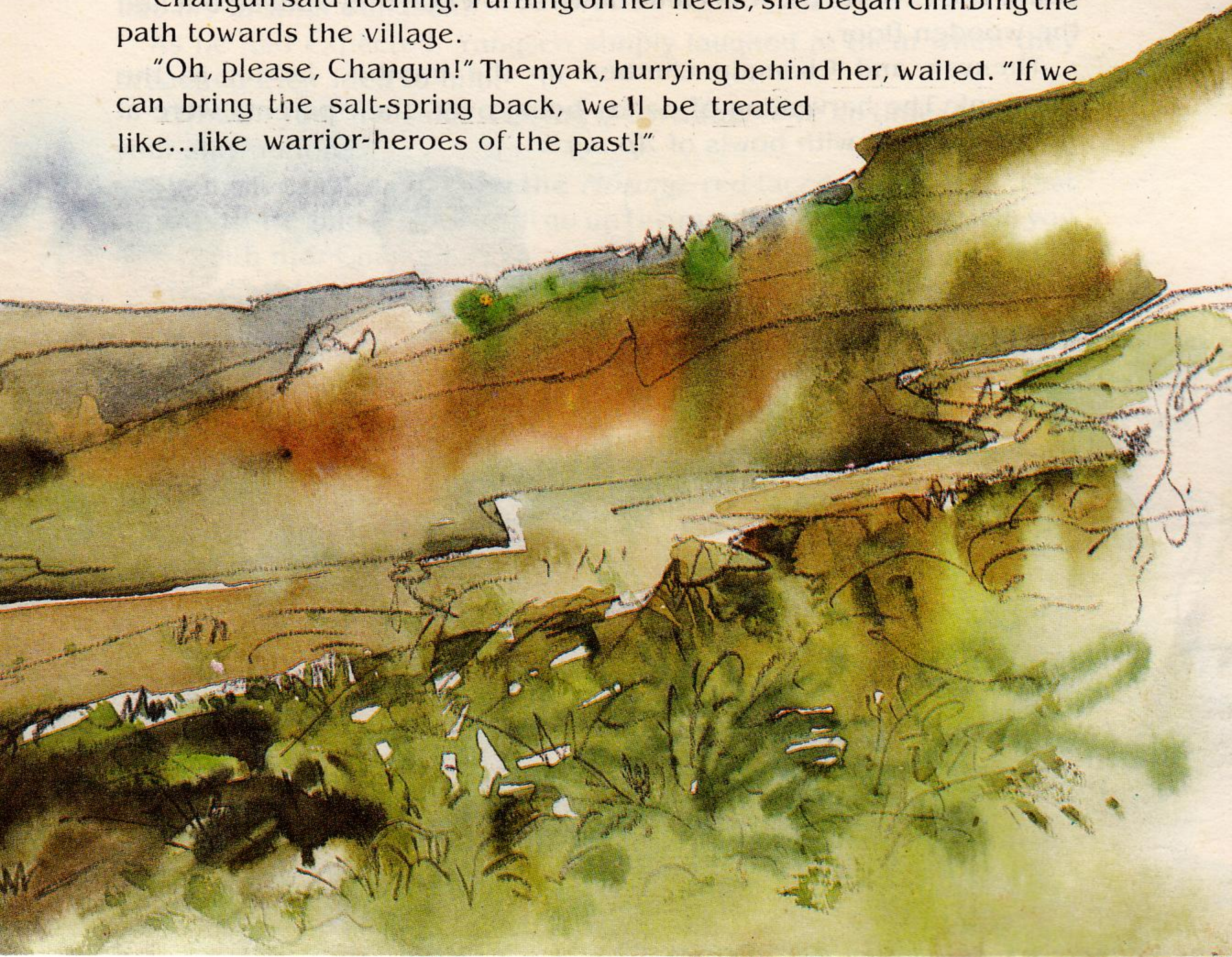
"Certainly, I am! Don't you remember what grandma told us? If we can bring the salt-spring back, prosperity would come to our village."

"No," said Changun firmly. "We can't do that. Even if the salt-spring can be brought back, it's up to our elders to do so."

"Oh, don't be a spoil-sport!" cried Thenyak. "We'll simply climb up a bit...find out what caused the spring to stop flowing, that's all. There's no need to tell our parents right now. They'll never allow us to go."

Changun said nothing. Turning on her heels, she began climbing the path towards the village.

"Oh, please, Changun!" Thenyak, hurrying behind her, wailed. "If we can bring the salt-spring back, we'll be treated like...like warrior-heroes of the past!"



But Changun continued to walk on without answering. Thenyak grabbed her by the arm and brought her to a stop.

"All right," he said. "I'll make a bargain with you. We'll persuade father to try and bring the salt-spring back. Only if he doesn't agree will we go up the mountain."

"We must ask Yangsen too."

"Yangsen! But he hardly takes notice of us. Just because he's old enough to live in the *Morung*, he struts about as proud as a rooster!"

"Nevertheless, he's our elder brother. We must ask him."

"Oh, all right," said Thenyak in exasperation. "We'll ask Yangsen too."

They reached the village. It was not a very large one. There were around sixty families in it. Their house was at one end. Like the other hutments, theirs too was set on wooden columns ten-twelve feet above the ground. This protected the dwellers from predators, as also from the earth's dampness. Moreover, livestock such as pigs and buffaloes could be kept in the shade underneath the floor.

The walls were of spliced bamboo, the roof of leaves of the *Takou* palm. The eaves of the roof came down so low that they almost touched the wooden floor.

Thenyak and Changun climbed up the bamboo ladder to the hutment. The harvesting of paddy being over, their parents were at home, relaxing with bowls of *Apong*.



The children told them about what Grandma Kamlong had said about salt-making among the *Noctes*. Thenyak asked his father why no one in the village had tried to find out why the salt-spring had stopped flowing.

"It was the will of *Jauban* which stopped the flow," their father replied.

"Aren't you going to try and bring it back?" Thenyak asked.

"Of course not," his father replied. "If *Jauban* wills it, the salt-spring will flow again."

"Don't bother your father, children," their mother admonished. "He's been working hard in the fields. He deserves some rest now."

The two children went to the village *Morung* next. It was a large, dormitory-type structure. Unmarried young men of the village lived in the *Morung*. In *Nocte* society as soon as a boy matured into a youth, he had to leave his parental house and stay in the *Morung*.

Thenyak eagerly awaited the day when he would be old enough to live in a *Morung*. But he was just twelve now, a year older than Changun. He would have to wait a while before he could strut about like his brother Yangsen!

As he had expected, Yangsen simply laughed at them when they broached their idea to him.

"Off with you," he said, shooing them away, "I've no time for you or your silly notions."

Thenyak came away from the *Morung*, red-faced and angry. "That settles it!" He said fiercely, "I'll go up the mountain tomorrow. Will you come with me, Changun?"

"Yes," said his sister, "I'll come."



IN QUEST OF THE SALT-SPRING

Early next day, after their morning meal, Thenyak and Changun were off on their quest.

They had little difficulty slipping away unnoticed from the village. *Loku*, the most important of *Nocte* festivals, was just three days away. The villagers were too busy preparing for it to have eyes for them.

Both had bamboo tubes strapped to their backs. This was Changun's idea. They could carry drinking water in them on their way up. If they found the salt-spring, they could fill the tubes with salt water as proof.

Thenyak also carried a *Dao*, or a broad-bladed knife.

On reaching the river, they filled the tubes with water. Then they began their climb, following the well-defined track of the dry spring-bed.

A thin curtain of mist draped the mountain. As the sun rose higher, it gradually lifted. However, the undergrowth was layered with morning dew. This made the ground slippery and footholds difficult to obtain. Their ascent, therefore, was slow.

The slope had been gentle till they crossed the paddy fields. But now it rose up steeply. Progress became even slower. But neither Thenyak nor Changun thought of turning back. They continued their ascent, pausing occasionally to catch their breath, or to gaze with childish glee at some exotic orchid or some unfamiliar form.

Two hours of steady climb brought them to a rocky shelf. They sat upon it for a brief rest and took a few swigs of water.

Never before had they climbed so high. From their perch upon the rock they could see a long way off. The lower hills rolled away around them like sand-dunes upon a windswept river-bank.

They spotted their village. Thenyak let out a surprised whistle.

"Our houses look like toys!" he exclaimed.

"And our villagers!" cried Changun excitedly. "They look like...like ants!"

They munched some berries which they had picked on the way. Taking another drink of water, they set off once again.

They were upon the higher reaches of the mountain now. The track laid by the dry salt-spring became very narrow. The thick jungles rose

like two giant walls on either side. Time and again Thenyak had to wield his *Dao* to cut through barriers of close-woven creepers.

Though the sun had risen high in the sky, it was cool, damp and gloomy in the forest. This was because the branches of tall trees met overhead, shutting out much of the sunlight.

Thenyak and Changun were children of the mountains. The steep



climb may have exhausted others, but not them. Nor were they afraid of the dangers within the jungles.

Because they lived close to nature, they knew that most of these dangers were imaginary. Large predators, for instance, preferred to slink away at the sound or smell of human approach. Same was the case with snakes. Unless one accidentally disturbed a creature of the wild, startling it into attacking, one could always move about in safety.

But one needed to be on the alert. That was why Thenyak's eyes constantly probed the ground ahead as they climbed.

Because they were moving over a well-laid, sparsely vegetated track, their passage had been relatively easy. So far they had met with only one obstacle—a large python which was curled around the low branch of a tree. Thenyak had thumped the ground repeatedly with his *Dao*. The python had raised its blunt, hammer-like head, flicked out its forked tongue, and slid away to a higher branch.

But, halfway up the mountain, a more serious obstacle came their way. Changun's sharp ears were the first to hear the sounds.

"Thenyak," she called out in a loud whisper. "Wait! Listen!"

Her brother stopped and cocked his ears. He too heard the sounds now—the creaking of bamboo, sharp crack of snapping branches and low whinnies.

"Oh no!" he cried out, his face a picture of dismay. "A herd of wild elephants!"

"Let's get closer," Changun said. "Perhaps it is a herd on the move."

Taking care not to make the least noise, the duo crawled up a little ahead. They could not see the herd. The grey-black hides of the elephants blended too well with the foliage for that. But the sounds made by the herd as it fed grew louder.

Soon it became clear that the herd of wild elephants was not on the move. It had chosen the spot ahead as a feeding ground, and it seemed as if it might stay on for quite a while.

There was no question of attempting to slip through that herd. Their path upstream was firmly blocked!

"What do we do now, Thenyak?" Changun asked.

"We wait." Her brother replied grimly as he plonked down on the fern covered ground.





THE CRYSTAL CAVE

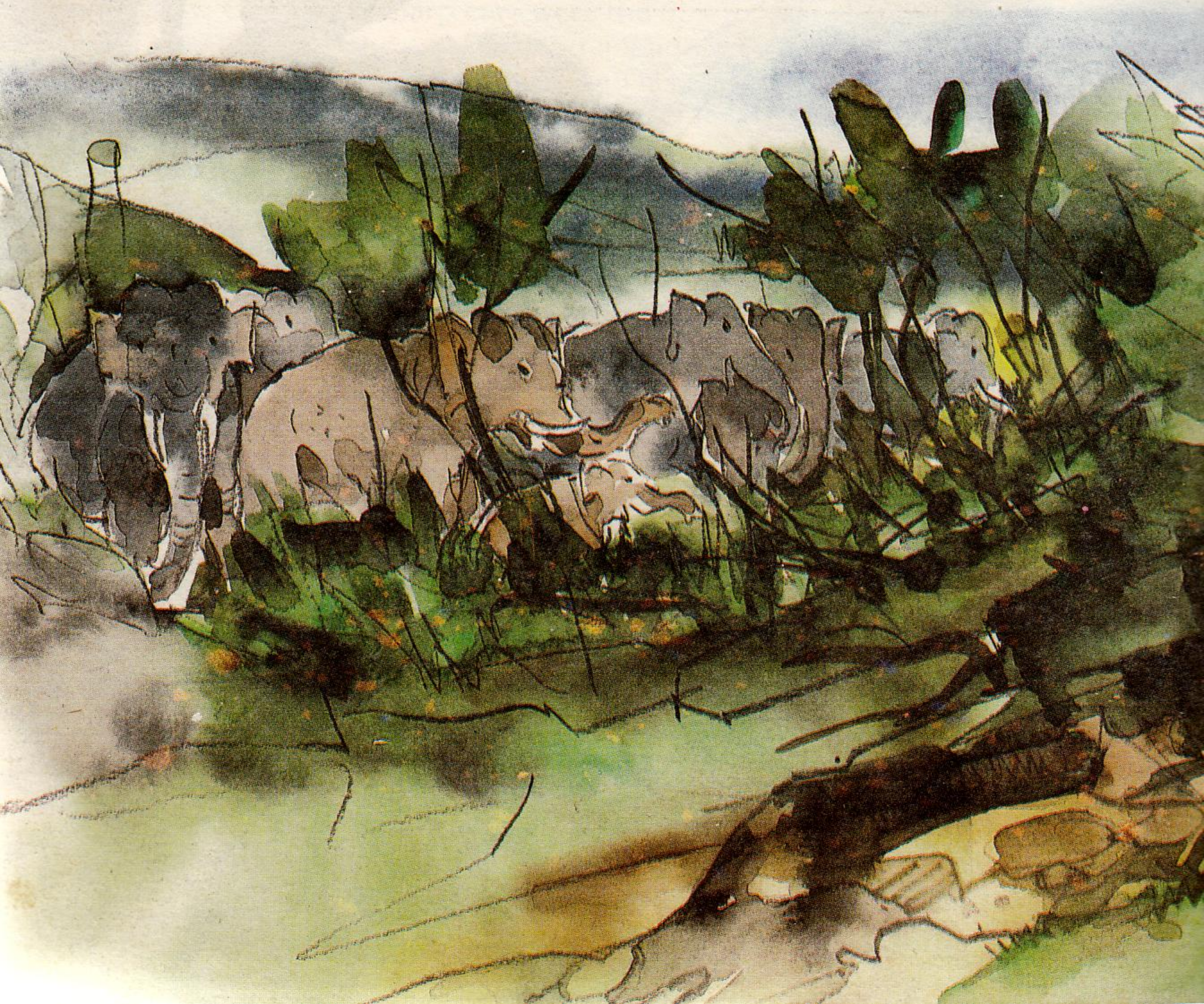
The minutes ticked by. The children waited patiently for the herd to move away from their path.

However, they lost none of their alertness, constantly scanning their surroundings, particularly for leeches. These could suck a person dry within minutes, unless kept at bay.

Apart from the sounds made by the feeding elephants, the jungle was silent. The deep hush was broken only twice—by the raucous “hooockoo, hooockoo” call of a hoolock gibbon, and a pangolin scampering through the undergrowth.

An hour of waiting, and Thenyak grew impatient.

“We’ve to find another way,” he whispered to Changun. “The herd



might stay on for the whole day. We haven't come all this way only to go back. Let's try and circle around them, and get back to the spring-bed further ahead."

"That wouldn't be wise," cautioned Changun. "The jungles here are very thick. You won't be able to cut a path through them. Also, we might get lost."

"At least let's make the attempt," Thenyak said. "It's better than twiddling our thumbs here, doing nothing."

He stood up determinedly. With a firm grip on the *Dao*, he began hacking away at the undergrowth towards the left of the spring-bed.

Changun continued to sit where she was.

Oh, what a great deal of undergrowth there was—thorny jengpat and ratan cane, tough strands of creepers and climbers, ferns and shrubs! Ten minutes of hacking, and he could barely progress a metre or two.

Changun, as always, was right! Thenyak realised that he could not cut his way through the jungle.



But the smug smile on Changun's face spurred him on for a little while longer. Finally, however, he reached a large clump of dwarf bamboo. It was impossible to hack through them. Thenyak conceded defeat!

"You were right, Changun," he told his sister. "We've no choice now. The sun's already on its way down. We can't wait any longer. Let's go back to our village."

Thenyak's shoulders drooped with disappointment.

But, abruptly, Changun jumped to her feet. "Hush!" she whispered. "Listen!"

Up ahead the sounds of feeding had ceased. Now they heard heavy bodies crash through the thick foliage. The elephant herd was on the move!

Neither Thenyak nor Changun knew what had caused the herd to go away. Was it the sound of Thenyak's *Dao*? Or had the direction of the wind changed, carrying the smell of men to the elephants?

Whatever the cause, the herd was leaving. The faces of the children wore broad smiles.

Fifteen minutes later they resumed their upward journey. They climbed for another fifty-sixty metres, and all of a sudden stumbled into a clearing.

A tiny patch of open flat-land, set like a miniature plateau on the mountainside! Neither grass nor shrubs grew upon this clearing. The bare earth underneath their feet was smoke-grey clay.

Hundreds of hoof marks were visible on the ground. The children could see the pug-marks of wild cats too, as also the deeper imprints of elephant feet.

"I know what it is!" Changun cried out. "It is a natural salt-lick!"

Thenyak nodded. Such salt-licks were to be found in many places within the jungles. Wild animals came to lick the earth for salt. This took care of the salt requirement of their bodies. While the earth that was consumed acted as a purgative.

Even as they stood watching, a solitary barking deer entered the salt-lick from the surrounding jungle. The deer was about to start licking the earth when it caught the whiff of an alien smell. Its head jerked upright. For one brief instant it looked straight at the children. Then it bolted towards the cover of the jungle.

Thenyak and Changun burst out laughing.

The salt-spring furrow ran through the centre of the clearing, dividing it into two equal halves. But the furrow did not continue up the mountain. The children could see a hollow on the mountainside on the



opposite edge of the clearing. The furrow seemed to disappear into that hollow.

Their hearts thumping with excitement, Thenyak and Changun raced towards the hollow.

As they had guessed, it was a cave. The entrance was as wide as a door of a hutment. The sunlight lit up the interior at the cave's mouth. But beyond that was utter darkness.

The walls of the tunnel-like cave were coated with white crystals. Heaps of these rose like molehills from the floor and dangled like wasps' nests from the ceiling. The pure white crystalline heaps glittered in the slanting rays of the afternoon sun.

Thenyak bent down and picked up a pinch of the crystals. He put it to the tip of his tongue.

"It's salt," he whispered in wonder, as if unable to believe his tongue!



THE UNSOLVED MYSTERY

Straightening up, Thenyak began to hop about wildly, in imitation of a tribal war-dance, whooping and shrieking in gay abandon.

"Salt! Salt!" he yelled. "We've found salt!"

The mountains and jungles took up his shrieks in jubilant echoes.

Changun said nothing. Nor did she dance about like her brother. But the huge grin on her face showed how happy she was.

After a while Thenyak ceased his war-dance. He flung himself panting upon the ground.



"There's enough salt in this cave to last our village a thousand years," he said.

"We must be close to the spring now," Changun observed.

"That tunnel-like cave is a natural salt-mine. The spring flowed through it, carrying some of the salt away."

"Come," said Thenyak, rising to his feet. "Let's look for the spring."

"But the trail ends at the cave! We have nothing we can follow now."

"Oh, we can go through the cave," said Thenyak. "The trail is sure to continue on the other side. That opening is wide enough for the two of us."

"Don't be silly, Thenyak!" Changun exclaimed. "See how dark the cave is. To enter it without lighted flares would be foolish."

"Fiddlesticks!" scoffed Thenyak. "Since the spring once flowed through it, there must be another opening to this cave. We can walk blindly through it till we emerge on the other side."

"What if it was an underground spring? What if the cave doesn't have another opening? What if the tunnel branches out ahead? We might be trapped then. And, Thenyak, see how pure this salt is. We mustn't trample upon and dirty it by going in."

Changun's string of questions gave her brother food for thought. He now appreciated how sensible her observations were.

"All right. We shan't go in," he conceded, looking up at the bright blue cloudless sky. The sun was already halfway down on its journey across the horizon.

He sprang up. "Let's not waste time," he urged. "We'll make a final effort to find the spring. Who knows, we might also solve the mystery as to why it dried up."

The mountainside sloped steeply up from the edge of the flat-land. It was, however, not densely vegetated for some distance. This allowed the children to climb up a little ahead without too much toil.

They kept their ears open for the sound of running water. They also kept looking around them for a sign of the spring. There was none.

But they did see something else far off towards their right... a bare, scab-like patch on the mountain's belly, as if the greenery had been scooped away by a giant spoon.

"Up there!" Thenyak said, pointing at the patch. "A big landslide! Could it have blocked the path of the spring, Changun?"

"It's difficult to tell from this distance," Changun replied. "I wish we could have gone closer to find out."





But they did not have time enough for further exploration. It would have taken them quite a while to cut through the vegetation to reach that spot.

"Looks as though we'll never find out the answer to the salt-spring mystery," Thenyak said. "Nor can we make it flow by our village again."

"Doesn't matter now, does it?" Changun observed. "We've discovered a salt-mine. It will keep our village supplied with salt for a long time. Our villagers will have to come here to collect the salt, that's all."

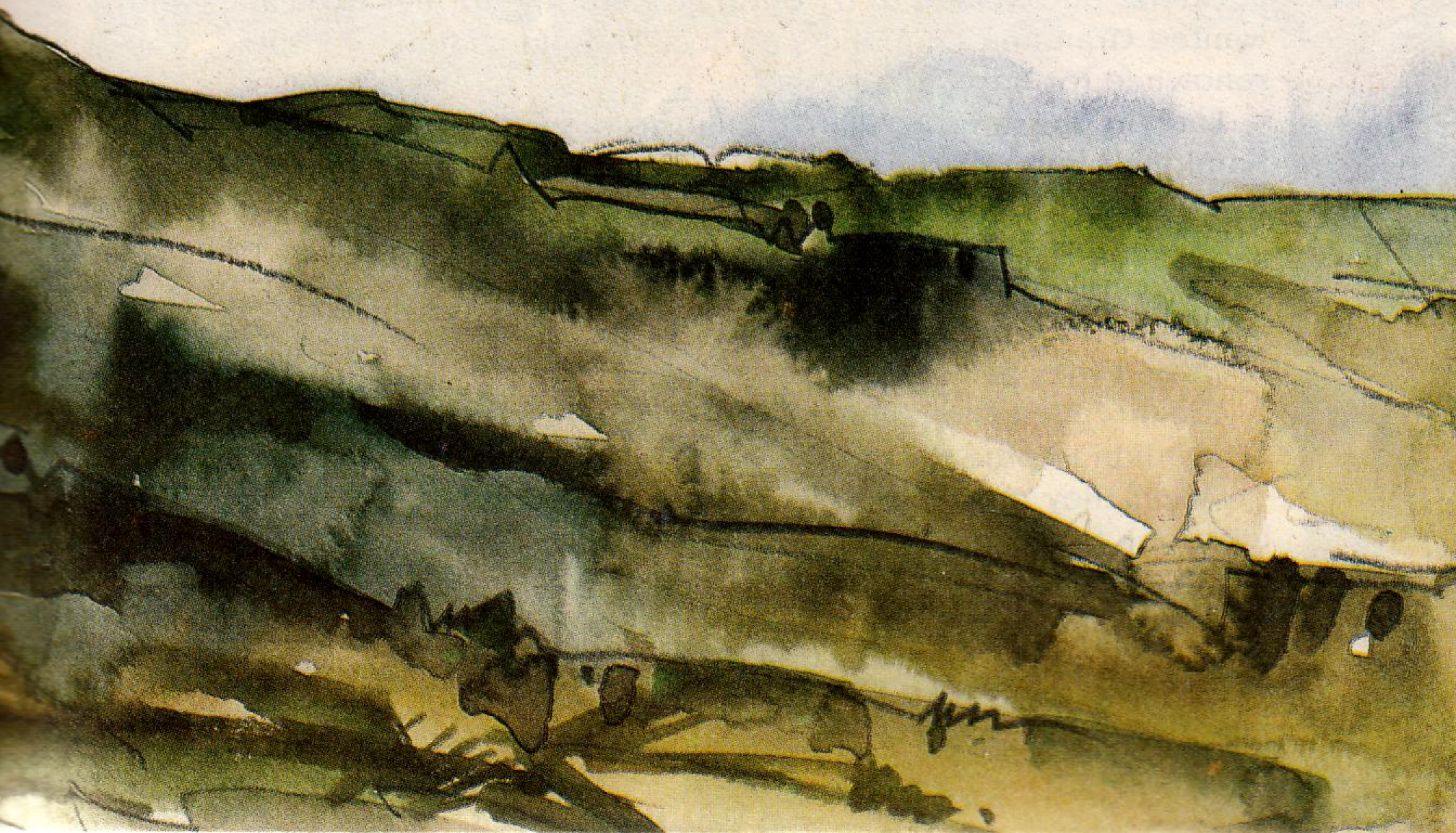
The two of them turned and scrambled down to the flat-land. They drank the water which remained in the bamboo tubes. Then they placed the tubes upside down on the ground to dry them completely.

"Oh, Changun!" Thenyak cried out happily. "We'll return to our village like warriors of old!"

Changun laughed. "We wouldn't be carrying heads of enemy warriors though," she said. "But we shall carry back something even more precious... salt! As grandma had said, our village will be prosperous again."

Having waited for some time, Thenyak and Changun picked up the bamboo tubes and shook them hard to ensure that they were completely dry. Chattering and laughing, they packed the tubes with as much salt as they would hold.

Then, carrying the treasure upon their backs, they began the descent home.



THE TRIUMPHANT RETURN

Thenyak and Changun's absence from the village went unnoticed throughout the morning and early afternoon.

Their father was at the *Lowang's* house all morning. The council of village elders had gathered there to discuss arrangements for the *Loku* feast with the chief. The *Loku* festival, celebrated to bid farewell to the old year and welcome the new, is held just after the crops have been harvested. It was the job of the council of village elders to fix the time for the commencement of the festivities.

Yangsen, the children's elder brother, was at the village *Morung* with other young men. They were practising the dance which they would perform during the festival. They were also preparing themselves for the ceremonial hunt which would conclude the *Loku* celebrations.

The children's mother was busy in the house. She was making rice-cakes and dishes to be served to visitors during the festival.

Thus no one knew that Thenyak and Changun were not in the village.

Their absence during the afternoon meal caused no concern. With school closed, they often spent the entire day with Grandma Kamlong. Their parents assumed that they were with their grandma on this day too.

The children's mother discovered that this was not so quite by accident. She wished to try out a new stuffing for her rice-cakes and wanted Grandma Kamlong's advice. The old widow, of course, was renowned for her cooking.

Late in the afternoon the children's mother went to Grandma Kamlong's hutment. She expected to find Thenyak and Changun there and was surprised when she did not.

"Where are the children?" she asked Grandma Kamlong.

"They haven't come today," grandma replied.

"What! But we thought they were with you!"

"Aren't they at your house?"

"No," replied the children's mother, trying not to sound panicky.

"They didn't come for the afternoon meal either."

"Well, they must be around somewhere," grandma said. "Come, let's look for them."



The old woman and her daughter-in-law scoured the entire village for the missing children. Not finding them, they informed the children's father. He, along with a neighbour, searched the village and adjacent areas. But there was no trace of the children.

They were all really worried now. They went to the *Morung* and summoned Yangsen.

"Your brother and sister are missing," his father told the youth. "We must inform the entire village and organise a search-party. Go quickly and send a message on the *Thom*."

The *Thom* was a big hollow log-drum kept inside the *Morung*. It was used to send messages to neighbouring villages or within the village itself.

Soon the *Thom* began sending out a distress signal. In response, villagers began to gather before the *Lowang's* house. The chief himself came out and learnt that two village youngsters were missing.

"Can you think of any particular place they might have gone to?" he asked their parents.

But it was Grandma Kamlong who replied.





"I'd talked to them about the salt-spring which once flowed by the village. They may have gone to find out why it dried up."

"Oh, yes," the children's mother spoke out. "Only last afternoon they were asking their father why we haven't tried to bring the spring back."

"They talked to me about it too," Yangsen said. "I didn't pay much heed at the time."

"They must have gone up the mountain then," the chief said. "We must set out after them at once."

He spoke loudly to the gathering, telling it what the matter was. "All you menfolk out there," he instructed, "go to your houses and arm yourself with *Daos* and spears. You must carry flares also. The sun is about to set and we may have to search long into the night."

The entire village hurried down to the valley below. The women and children waited at the mouth of the spring-bed while the men prepared to climb.



Suddenly someone yelled, "Wait! I see them! There they are, coming down the mountainside!"

All eyes turned upwards. Everyone saw them now—two shadowy outlines against the backdrop of the red, monstrous sun, tripping down the slope, as fleet and sure-footed as deer.

Grim faces dissolved into smiles of relief. The crowd broke out into loud cheers.

It was just as Thenyak had day-dreamt it would be—a cheering crowd of villagers waiting to welcome the warriors home!

They ran excitedly to Grandma Kamlong. "Grandma, grandma," they shouted. "We've found a cave of salt! Our village will be prosperous again!"

Unstrapping the bamboo tubes, they poured the salt onto the earth. The heaps glowed an eerie red in the light of the setting sun.



Grandma Kamlong led them by the hands to the *Lowang*. The villagers fell silent as the two children told the chief about their adventure.

"Well done, children!" the chief said, kneeling down and embracing Thenyak and Changun. "You've indeed brought back wonderful tidings for our village. Your courage deserves to be rewarded. I decree that you two will be the chief guests during this *Loku* festival."

Picking Thenyak up, the chief placed him on his shoulders. Changun's father picked her up and placed her on his shoulders.

Grandma Kamlong broke out into a *Nocte* ballad which celebrated courage. The villagers took up the refrain. Then, with the *Lowang* and the children's father leading the way, the singing crowd marched triumphantly back to the village.







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